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# Peninsular Bighorn Sheep

(U.S. Population)

## What is the Peninsular bighorn sheep?

The Peninsular Ranges population of bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) is a large mammal found along the open slopes of the Peninsular Mountain Ranges from the San Jacinto Mountains, California south into the Volcan Tres Virgenes Mountains near Santa Rosalia, Baja California, Mexico.

Bighorn live in hot and dry desert regions where the land is rough & rocky, sparsely vegetated, and characterized by steep slopes, canyons, and washes. Their entire range extends along approximately 500 miles of contiguous habitat.

The Peninsular bighorn sheep is similar in appearance to other bighorn sheep having pale brown fur and permanent horns, which become rough and scarred with age. In comparison to other bighorn sheep, the Peninsular subspecies generally has a paler color and larger, heavier horns.

The massive, curled horns of the male rams make them easily distinguishable from the smaller, uncoiled horns of the female. Bighorn sheep are active during the day spending much of their time feeding on native plants and resting in shaded areas. Breeding occurs during the male rut in early fall and lambs are usually born between January and June with usually one lamb produced per year.

## Why is the Peninsular bighorn sheep endangered?

The Peninsular bighorn sheep populations in the U.S. have declined from approximately 1,170 individuals in 1971 to only 335 individuals in 1999. The adverse effects of disease, low lamb survival, habitat loss, degradation, predation, urban development, and habitat fragmentation are continuing to endanger the continued existence of this species. These adverse effects are intensified where urban development has drastically reduced and fragmented suitable habitat.

Population projections anticipate that by the year 2010 the human population in the Coachella Valley will increase from 227,000 to over 497,000, not including 165,000 to 200,000 seasonal residents. Further habitat losses resulting from urban development and human population growth will likely have a significant negative effect on remaining populations of bighorn sheep in southern California

## What is being done to save the Peninsular bighorn sheep?

The Peninsular bighorn sheep was listed as threatened by the State of California in 1984 and later listed as endangered under the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) in March 1998. On July 5, 2000, nearly 876,000 acres were proposed as critical habitat for this species. Critical habitat is defined as specific areas essential to the conservation of a federally listed species. A draft recovery plan for the bighorn sheep was published in December 1999. The draft plan addresses conservation strategies that, if carried out, could result in its down listing and/or eventual removal from ESA protection.

The California Department of Fish and Game, the California Department of Parks and Recreation, and the Bureau of Land Management have also developed management plans for the bighorn sheep, acquired 30,000 acres of habitat reserves, conducted research, and established three ecological reserves that protect important watering sites.

Currently, the Service is working with local governments and other federal and state agencies to develop a Coachella Valley habitat conservation plan which would assure long-term sustainability of the region's ecosystems and provide for the conservation of native species. In addition to providing protection for the Peninsular bighorn sheep, the Coachella Valley habitat conservation plan will also help to protect up to 30 other endangered, threatened, and rare species.

Large-scale, long-term cooperative efforts such as the Coachella Valley conservation plan will become more and more important as human populations in and around the Sonoran Desert increase and demands for uses of the desert continue to grow.

## **What happens when a species is listed as endangered or threatened by the Federal government?**

Federal law prohibits “taking” of an endangered or threatened species - this includes activities that would harass, harm, or kill the listed species. Such actions can include habitat destruction that might affect a species through disruption of normal breeding, feeding, or sheltering activities. The ESA includes two sections that authorize incidental take in the case of otherwise legal activities. Any legal non-federal activity, such as building a home or roadway, that involves take of listed species, can be done if it is adequately addressed in a habitat conservation plan (HCP) and authorized under the terms of an incidental take permit issued under section 10(a) of the ESA.

The ESA and associated implementing regulations also require Federal agencies to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service when proposed federal actions may affect listed species. Section 7 of the ESA determines the conditions under which incidental take can occur.

## **Who is affected by the “taking” prohibition?**

The “taking” prohibition applies to the activities of public agencies, private enterprises, and individuals. As described above, exceptions to the prohibition are available through the section 10(a)(1)(B) permit and section 7 consultation provisions of the ESA.

## **Who is affected by the section 7 consultation requirement?**

The consultation requirement is triggered by any involvement of a Federal agency in a project that may affect listed species. This involvement can include Federal grants or funding for the project, implementation of the project, or issuance of a Federal permit (e.g., 404 permit from the Army Corps of Engineers). The consultation occurs between the Federal agency and the Service on a case-by-case basis, separate from other permit requirements for the project.

## **Who can apply for a section 10(a) permit?**

A section 10(a)(1)(B) permit can be issued for individual projects that will affect listed species or for large areas involving multiple species, jurisdictions, and development activities. In all cases, the permit application must be

accompanied by a “Habitat Conservation Plan” that demonstrates how impacts of the taking will be minimized and what will be done to ensure the species’ survival. In addition, the NCCP plans must satisfy the same criteria as an HCP. Because of the scale of the required conservation measures, applications typically cover areas that involve more than one project. In these cases, the permit is usually held by a local agency with land-use authority over the area within their jurisdiction.

## **What is required for a section 10(a) permit?**

Application for a section 10(a)(1)(B) permit must be accompanied by the following attachments:

1. A complete description of the activity for which the permit is being sought.
2. The common and scientific names of the species to be covered by the permit.
3. A “Habitat Conservation Plan”.

The “Habitat Conservation Plan” must specify:

- a. The impact which will likely result from the taking of the species.
- b. Steps the applicant will take to monitor, minimize and mitigate such impacts.
- c. The level and source of funding available to implement such steps.
- d. Procedures that will be used to deal with unforeseen circumstances.
- e. The names of the responsible party or parties.
- f. Alternative actions to the taking and the reasons why they were not selected.

In summary, the HCP must demonstrate that it will provide for the species in a way that will not jeopardize the continued survival and recovery of the species in the wild. The recovery of the Peninsular bighorn sheep is primarily dependant upon the conservation and management of the species habitat and populations.



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